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ABSTRACT

Most educators advocate cooperative learning in the curriculum. Heterogeneous grouping is also recommended so that students with mixed achievement levels work in a committee setting. Cooperative endeavors stress democracy as a way of life, according to many educators, as compared to competition in the classroom. This paper examines the philosophy of cooperative learning and heterogeneous grouping. The paper first gives an overview of cooperative learning and cites some of its good and bad points. Not all students are cooperative, and many times students need to work by themselves. The paper states that the teacher in cooperative learning becomes a guide, a simulator, and one who encourages, but not one who lectures nor dispenses information. It contends that there are selected questions which need to be raised regarding cooperative learning. The paper finds that there are a few educators who advocate a competitive curriculum and cites several reasons for the competitive philosophy, such as the United States is not keeping up with Japan and Germany in world trade, and United States students should be first in mathematics and science. It then considers, in depth, competition, based on the free enterprise system, in the classroom. The paper also addresses healthy competition in the classroom, and sets forth five guidelines for stressing competitive events. It raises several questions about competitive behavior in the classroom setting. The paper also outlines cooperative learning's advantages and disadvantages. It concludes that what truly matters is how each approach affects learners in the school and classroom setting. (NKA)

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Cooperative Learning Versus Competition: Which is Better?

by Marlow Ediger

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING VERSUS COMPETITION
WHICH IS BETTER?

Most educators appear to advocate cooperative learning in the curriculum. Pupils then are to work together harmoniously to achieve objectives in the curriculum. Heterogeneous grouping is also recommended so that mixed achievement levels of pupil work in a committee setting.These educators emphasize democratic living in the classroom when pupils are grouped heterogeneously as compared to homogeneously. Cooperative endeavors stresses democracy as a way of life, according to may educators, as compared to competition among pupils in the classroom. If full inclusion is emphasized, then a committee in cooperative learning may truly be heterogeneous with increased diversity in terms of pupil abilities. Let us examine the philosophy of cooperative learning and heterogeneous grouping more fully.

Cooperative Learning

As I read journal articles and other teacher education materials I feel that most educators advocate cooperative learning throughout much of the school day. There is a distinctive kind of reasoning emphasized by advocates. Pupils may then learn from each other. Perhaps, more can be learned from peers as compared to the teacher. Learners are cooperative beings and like to work together with other pupils. Cooperative learning can be emphasized in all curriculum areas and throughout most or all of the school day. Pupils are serious achievers when working together with peers. Each one desires to do his/ her fair share of work within a committee. Fast learners can assist the slower pupils to achieve well. They can learn from the slow learners in return. Pupils need to learn to get along with each other and to respect the

abilities of others. Diversity in the curriculum is to be stressed.

I believe there are numerous loopholes in the reasoning of cooperative learning advocates. I emphasize that not all pupils by any means are cooperative. There is rivalry, hostility, and aggression among pupils. To be sure, there are many pupils who are cooperative beings in wishing to work well together with others in an harmonious manner. One has only to observe pupil behavior to notice that pupils are both cooperative and noncooperative beings. I thoroughly agree that pupils should learn to work well with others in school and later in the work place. But to what degree in terms of the total length of the school day should pupils work on cooperative endeavors? My thinking is that pupils should work in committees effectively since life itself consists of working well with others. However, there are many times when individuals need to work by the self. All of us find ourselves working on tasks and responsibilities by the oneself, without involvement of others. Thus there needs to be rational balance in the school curriculum between working with others as well as working individually on tasks and activities.

There is seemingly a learning style which pupils possess that prefers working with others on lessons, projects, and activities. These pupils, no doubt, might well prefer a committee or cooperative learning experience. Together, the pupil may achieve more than working individually. These pupils might be motivated more so with other learners than working by the self. Learners may motivate and challenge each other in a committee setting and yet efforts are harmonized to attain a togetherness in an educational endeavor. Pupils need to be highly accepting of each other in cooperative learning. They must respect diversity among pupils and ideas. The use of ridicule and sarcasm is to be frowned upon. Rather, the pupil needs to encourage broad participation by members of the team. Group cohesion is necessary so that the goals of cooperative learning are being attained. The committee may be evaluated together as well as individually in their team contributions. All need to participate actively and achieve maximally.

Failure for one or two to achieve in cooperative learning hinders optimal attainment for these pupils. Each must be serious in persevering and working toward objectives. The individual needs to blend his/ her efforts with those of others on the team. All on the team must participate optimally, no one dominate the committee endeavors. Learners should stay on the task at hand, not digress from agreed upon goals. Tasks need to become clear through interacting with each other. Achievement toward goals must be reviewed periodically in order to notice how much progress has been made and how much further the committee needs to go in order to achieve agreed upon goals.

The teacher in cooperative learning becomes a guide, a stimulator, and one who encourages, but not one who lectures nor dispenses information. He/ she is a resource person who has much knowledge of keeping pupils on task. The teacher as resource person has numerous materials and necessary information from which pupils in cooperative learning may gather what is needed to achieve objectives. As a helper and facilitator, the teacher is motivated to assist pupils to be creative, to engage in critical thought, and to identify and solve problems. Higher levels of cognition are necessary here. The teacher knows how to relate to learners in order that higher levels of cognition on the pupil's part in teaching and learning is in evidence.

There are selected questions that need to be raised pertaining to cooperative learning. These are the following:

1. how much time in the school day should be given to cooperative learning?
2. how should committees be formed for cooperative learning?
3. who selects members of a committee?
4. how permanent should committee membership be?
5. how flexible should committee membership be if a pupil wishes to change to a different committee?

Frequently, I have received the impression that writers/ speakers in education recommend continuous cooperative endeavors in a

classroom. Certainly, learning opportunities need to be varied. Little is mentioned as to who should choose committee members. The teacher may make the choices. Pupils could also volunteer to serve on a committee. Random selection could be used to determine committee membership. Committee membership could be very short indeed for a particular group, perhaps a day or several days. Membership could be rather enduring also, such as planned tasks that last six weeks or so. There are different types of tasks such as those that are short in duration, such as planning refreshments for an end of the school year party. Cooperative learning members could also be together for an entire thematic unit of six weeks such as planning and making a model bedouin village in a unit on The Middle East. There will be pupils who do not like the project or a selected pupil on the committee. What is the answer here? This happens even if members have been chosen carefully using desired criteria.

Competition in the School Curriculum

There are a few educators, not many, who advocate a competitive curriculum. Many reasons are given for the competitive philosophy. Generally, it is based upon the free enterprise system. The US is not keeping up with Japan and Germany in world trade. US pupils need to be more competitive and be first in the nation in mathematics and science as advocated by the National Governors Conference in 1989 with Education 2000. Warnings are given by newsreporters as to low achievement in mathematics and science of US pupils as compared to those of other industrialized nations. Goals have been established on the state and local levels in order that learners may measure up to these levels in terms of what is deemed necessary to be first in the world in mathematics and science. Competition here rather than cooperation is emphasized.

The voucher system has many supporters in the US. Parents receiving the voucher money may redeem it at an other school which they deem to be better than the local school. The voucher money, if it

becomes law, stresses that per pupil costs of education for a school year at the local school would equal the voucher that may then be used at the receiving school. There are advocates of parents being able to use the voucher money in either public or parochial schools. Advocates believe with competition, bad schools and teachers will have no clients and therefore not be in existence. The better schools with more clients than ever will serve as models for other teachers to emulate. Competition for numbers of pupils in a school under the voucher system is strictly competitive. Poor schools will go out of business.

Merit pay has numerous advocates in the US. With merit pay teachers rated as being superior or excellent receive additional pay for their quality services. Those supporting merit pay believe that teachers individually will work harder and do a better job of teaching once they are rewarded for doing outstanding work. Differentiated pay is then desired among teachers. No longer would the single salary schedule then be in operation. The latter is based on the number of years of teaching experience and the level of attained education at colleges/ universities as being sole determines of salary to be obtained by a teacher. Critics state that mediocrity is rewarded in teaching with the single salary schedule. If merit pay is implemented, competition for the higher salaries would then definitely be in evidence.

Open enrollment also emphasizes the free enterprise system. Here, parents choose for their sons and daughters which kind of a school the latter are to attend. The chosen school may bypass many local schools and school systems. Parents and the child do the choosing not the local school or the locally assigned teacher. The purpose is competition in parents choosing which school and teacher is best for their offspring. Teachers and schools not selected may need statewide superintendents and newly retrained and reeducated teachers.

In a few states, e. g. Kentucky and New Jersey, schools must measure up to a definite standard in terms of standardized test results, or the state will take over deficient schools. There is competition here in a school not being delinquent as to pupil achievement revealed by

test results.

The US Secretary of Education may list state by state how well pupils are achieving in different curriculum areas. This is called the wall chart. States are compared against each other in terms of pupil achievement, money spent on education per pupil, and average daily attendance of pupils. With competition among the different states in terms of wall chart figures, personal pride of each state to improve in education might be an end result when making these comparisons, according to selected educators and many lay people.

There are schools that have arranged contracts with commercial companies to teach their children. Educational Alternatives Incorporated (EAI) from Minneapolis, Minnesota is an example. EAI agrees with the school district how much achievement and the cost of services will be involved in a given school year. EAI then assumes responsibility for administration and instruction of the involved schools. There is competition here between the public schools and commercial companies in terms of who can provide the best education for pupils. It might well be true that school administrators and teachers remain the same with EAI as compared to earlier arrangements. EAI still does the training of teachers to use methodology as they deem to be good and profitable.

Additional means of competing with the public schools in terms of teaching pupils is to have charter schools and magnet schools.

When supervising student and cooperating teachers in the public schools, I have observed the following to encourage competition among pupils in the classroom setting:

1. a chart on the wall showing the names of each pupil in class indicating how many words were spelled correctly for each week using the basal spelling text. Gold stars were received by the top spellers, followed by silver stars for the next best set of spellers. Other colors of stars were situated next to the name of the pupil indicating his/ her spelling achievement.

2. the teacher announcing to the entire class how many problems each pupil solved correctly from one lesson from the basal text in

mathematics. The announcements were made for each day of pupil practice in mathematics using the basal textbook.

3. pupil test results in social studies were posted on the bulletin board ranking learners from high to low in achievement. The teacher commented on how well or how poorly individual pupils here had achieved.

4. prizes announced prior to beginning a new unit in science. These prizes were to be awarded to pupils depending upon how many total points each received a a result of participating in different projects and tasks.

5. the pupil of the day selected by the teacher being presented with and wearing "the king's or queen's hat. There was much competition among pupils in class in being able to wear this hat for a day.

There are many additional examples which can be given whereby competition can and is being emphasized in the classroom setting. Pupils are compared with each other as to term projects, daily assignments, oral reports, oral reading, and test results, among other items. A major purpose of standardized tests is to compare one pupil against another. A parent, after receiving information of test results from his/ her offspring, may, during informal conversation, compare test results with parents of other children. I have heard parents reprimand their children for not doing better on a standardized test. Generally, the reprimand emphasizes why the child did not do better than so and so. Many parents are highly competitive in wanting their offspring to be a cheer leader, member of the first team in football or basketball, have a leading role in the school play, and/ or being a class officer.

Competition can be healthy; it can also be destructive. Cooperative learning can be positive as well as negative. It all depends upon what transpires in either competitive or cooperative situations.

I will first discuss healthy competition. Here, pupils respect each

other even though one or more persons in a given situation do not experience victory. Healthy competition can bring out the best within the person. Effort and perseverance is involved! There can be much interest on the part of all in competition be it between individuals or within a committee competing against another committee. I recommend the following guidelines for stressing competitive events:

1. those competing should be somewhat equivalent in talents, skills, and abilities.
2. those competing should have positive attitudes toward each other.
3. those competing should have a desire to participate and learn.
4. those competing should have definite goals to achieve in the competitive event.
5. those competing should realize that not all individuals can be winners. Best it is if all pupils can be winners! This is definitely possible.

Questions that might be raised about competitive behavior in the classroom setting include the following:

1. does competition increase hostility among pupils toward each other?
2. does competition hinder pupils in achieving affective objectives?
3. does competition work against the learning style of selected pupils?
4. does competition compare involved pupils unfavorable due to differences in abilities, interests, and capabilities?
5. does competition increase achievement of pupils?

Teachers might wish to encourage positive competition among individuals in the classroom setting. Competition is neither good nor bad, but it depends upon how it affects individuals.

We all need to realize that as adults, we compete in numerous ways such as for jobs and occupations, promotions, marriage partners,

good grades in classes taken, and for leadership responsibilities in society, among others.

Cooperative learning has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are the following:

1. pupils do have opportunities here in learning to work together with others.

2. selected pupils have as their favorite learning style the working together with peers, rather than working individually.

3. goals in life can be achieved in cooperating with each other, rather than through dog eat dog approaches.

4. learners can realize that school and learning may be enjoyable through cooperative learning.

5. pupils need to learn to assist each other in the school and classroom setting. We human beings are dependent upon each other for survival.

Questions which need to be raised about cooperative learning include the following:

1. might pupils become highly competitive in a negative way within a committee setting?

2. might personality clashes hinder pupil achievement in committee settings?

3. might there be learning styles whereby selected pupils do not do well in group work, but would achieve better in more competitive settings? I would like to emphasize here that pupils individually may compete against their past performance with intent of making continuous progress.

4. might there be a rational balance between individual and committee endeavors in the curriculum which could benefit most pupils?

5. might there be leaders who do their best in cooperative learning?

There are no clear cut answers to these questions. Even well

designed research studies have their many weakness. Human beings write test items for the measurement device, ensuring much subjectivity in a research study. Objectivity occurs when all conditions are kept similar in giving the tests to the experimental and the control groups. Or can they be similar/same? No, they are not. Pupils feel differently from one time to the next. Not all pupils find that revealing what has been learned occurs best through testing. There are pupils who like authentic means of revealing what has been learned better as compared to being tested.

In Closing

Educators need to reexamine the cooperation versus competition philosophies in teaching pupils. Which approach is better of the two? It is hard to say. Neither approach in and of itself is good. There can be negative teaching in either approach. I have seen bad teaching as well as good teaching in either case. Merely having cooperative learning or saying that one has cooperative learning does not make for goodness or badness. What truly matters is how each approach affects learners in the school and classroom setting. I would recommend having rational balance among the two approaches. Pupils need to learn to work harmoniously with others as well as work well on an individual basis. Each pupil should strive to achieve optimally when working individually. After all, life in school and in society consists of both!